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Exploring (literally) one's consciousness

For Robert Monroe, that includes touring the future, leaving the body

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FABER — It all began with weird vibrations in 1958. As a broadcast executive in New York, Robert A. Monroe found himself having out-of-body experiences.

According to some psychiatrists and psychologists, that's not uncommon.

Monroe outlined his experiences in his 1971 book, "Journeys Out of the Body," which has since been translated into six languages. He touched on a subject that many people could not openly discuss without being considered unstable.

"His book opened up the topic for further discussion," said Robert L. Van de Castle, a professor in the department of behavioral medicine and psychology at the University of Virginia Medical School. "Before, if you mentioned you had an out-of-body experience, the guys with white coats and butterfly nets would come after you."

In his second and most recent book, "Far Journeys," Monroe details his laboratory work on a sound wave process — Hemi-Sync — that allows broader consciousness. Hemi-Sync is short for "hemispheric synchronization."

Monroe estimates that one out of every four people has had an out-of-body experience. His book also details a "guided tour" he took of the future beyond the year 3000.

Observers say Monroe's credibility lies in his mainstream background, which includes a previous career in broadcasting. An unobtrusive, relaxed 71-year-old with twinkly blue eyes, Monroe wears a pencil-thin mustache complemented by an equally-thin beard that traces his jowl.

Hemi-Sync, for which Monroe received a generic patent in 1975, served as his scientific springboard. He says it brings the two sides of the brain together by stereo headphones that send messages into each side. The two sides act in unison to hear a third signal — not a sound, but an electrical signal — which has the ability to access all levels of human consciousness.

For example, Monroe said, if you wanted to learn how to use a complicated piece of machinery, the Hemi-Sync tapes would help you coordinate your mental and physical processes.

"We are experimenting very broadly now," Monroe said, adding he doesn't know where it will stop.

"It started with simple applications, such as helping people go to sleep and then waking them up. It's very basic."

Monroe started his own research company in the late '50s because he couldn't find any one to explain his experiences.

In the meantime, he moved to Charlottesville and formed Jefferson Cable Corp. As president, he guided the construction and operation of cable television systems in Charlottesville and Waynesboro.

In 1973 he started the Monroe Institute of Applied Sciences, a non-profit educational and research organization that explores practical methods of accelerated learning through expanded forms of consciousness.

Five years later, the institute moved to an 800-acre tract in Faber, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Nelson County. It also houses the New Land community, which has about 35 families — mostly couples — living in made-to-order modern homes with panoramic views of the country side.

One of the members is Phyllis Berman Popkin, who recently moved from Princeton, N.J., with her husband, Arnie.

"We were living in Charlottesville, but felt we should move here," she said. "We

had gone through a Gateway program and at the end felt a wonderful calling that we should come here."

Week-long programs, seminars, a newsletter, tape cassettes and albums spread Monroe's message. Since 1973, he estimates that between 6,000 and 7,000 people have come to the institute from all over the world. The institute receives about 10,000 inquiries a year.

One of those programs, Gateway, uses Hemi-Sync to induce a relaxed state and lets people explore different levels of consciousness.

Rosalind McKnight, who teaches the courses "Introduction to Parapsychology" and "Death in Society" at Central Virginia Community College, has known Monroe since the early 1970s and worked with him as one of his early "Explorers." As such, she experimented with the Hemi-Sync process.

What she did is what Gateway participants pay $925 a week to experience.

"Bob would put me in a booth (a sensory deprivation area) and hook me up with headphones," she said.

She would be made as comfortable as possible, and lay on a water bed in the darkened room.

"I'd be really relaxed, and sounds would come in through the headphones. He'd be in the lab," she said, talking to her about her experience.

She'd transcend the various levels Monroe describes in "Far Journeys" — Focus 10, where the body is asleep but the mind is awake; Focus 12, expanded awareness; Focus 15, the level of "no time" and other dimensions; and for the advanced explorer, Focus 16 to 21, where Monroe says one "explore(s) other realities and energy systems beyond what we call time-space-physical matter."

McKnight says she knows of no other program like it.

"It's like being in another world with the way it's set up. You become involved in a world of your own."

Most visitors, she said, are professionals who seek a break from their routine or from stress.

The center does not advertise.

"We don't even know how they (visitors) hear of us. It's all word of mouth."

Only a lone, small sign announces the presence of the compound.

"(Monroe) has good marketing skills and he's a businessman. He's had an interesting dramatic career with radio," UVa's Van de Castle said.

But Van de Castle says he's not sure about Monroe's research.

"He doesn't have a body of research. The scientific community doesn't want claims but documentation. His work is more by word of mouth and testimony. Rather, what (scientists) would like to see is carefully researched, statistically quantified research."

Monroe studied engineering and journalism at Ohio State University. He said the institute adheres to the three I's — inquiry, information and innovation.

"We've been expanding at an incredibly rapid rate," said Nancy H. McMoneagle, director of the institute. "One of our biggest growth areas is research and development, especially in terms of applying Hemi-Sync to education, medicine, therapy and the arts."

In education, Hemi-Sync could be used to help students concentrate better; in medicine and therapy, it could help relax people or tone down pain; and in the arts, it could intensify an artist's creativity.

And the long-term effects?

Monroe said, "The Hemi-Sync process is very impartial and very impersonal. It's the same as electricity in the sense that you can use it constructively or in a derogatory way."

For instance, he said, they know there are three workable frequencies they can use to synthesize an epileptic seizure.

And Monroe's research continues. A new program — "H-Plus" — will make its debut this fall after four years of preparation. It operates on the premise that anything that can happen once can happen twice. When it happens twice, it becomes learnable. Anything that's learnable is teachable, and Monroe said that infers that anything that a human has done can be done again.

Suppose a 110-pound woman sees her child underneath a car, he said.

"She runs over and with superhuman strength lifts up the car and pulls out her child. We can make that happen. If a person — a little 110-pound woman — can lift 1,000 pounds, she needed that ability to set up a mental process that would let her do that."

Monroe works on five or six projects a time, McMoneagle said.

One of these is his upcoming book, "Ultimate Journey," which explores death.

"It will take a new overview from the conventional ones we have now. The first one is not thinking of death as losing consciousness. We have situations where we lose consciousness and it isn't death," he said.

People lose consciousness if they are hit in the head or when they sleep each night.

"Do we die every night?" he asked.

Monroe's book says, "What are you worried about dying for? You've been doing it all your life."

Monroe stays mostly around the institute now. He and his wife, who have six children, recently moved into a new house perched halfway up a mountain that overlooks his community. He says he doesn't lecture much any more, but he continues to have out-of-body experiences.

"I'm moving more into a contemplative period in my life," he said. "Traveling physically is quite a job at this point."